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CIA admits operation

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Mail snooping grew under Nixon, probbers told

By James Coates

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WASHINGTON — Congressional investigators believe a sophisticated mail opening operation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency may have been extended to thousands of Americans as part of the Nixon administration spying campaign against dissidents.

Informed sources said evidence indicates that many of 9,000 names turned over to the CIA by the Justice Department in 1970 as targets for surveillance were gathered thru mail monitoring.

The CIA has admitted publicly that a joint CIA-FBI mail opening operation was in effect in two United States cities between 1953 and 1973. In secret testimony before the Senate Post Office Committee, they identified the cities as New Orleans and New York and said the project was halted abruptly in 1973 because of the Watergate scandal.

A FORMER CIA agent familiar with the operation, Melvin Crain of San Diego, told The Tribune that "undetectable" electronic and mechanical devices developed by agency scientists were used to open and reseal the mail.

Crain, now a college teacher, said that until he quit CIA in 1959, every letter to or from the Soviet Union and several other Communist countries was opened and copied.

Sen. Gale McGee (D., Wyo.), chairman of the Post Office Committee, said the CIA told him during a closed session that the agency had recorded all names and addresses on the outside of the envelopes thruout the 20-year surveillance. That practice is legal.

MEANWHILE, lawyers for several groups have charged that mail openings or mail monitoring has been used against dissident political figures. In one case, radical Mark Rudd's mother's letter to a distant relative in Canada was intercepted and police reached the addressee before the letter did. Another domestic case involves a 15-year-old girl who wound up in FBI subversive files thru a "mail cover."

The main source of suspicion that mail opening went further is the well-publicized Huston Plan — a blueprint for a mixed bag of planned domestic

spying named after former White House security specialist Tom Charles Huston. Former Atty. Gen. John Mitchell has testified that the plan, which called for a massive mail opening operation was in force for five days in July of 1970 before it was dropped.

However, there are indications many parts of the plan apparently were later implemented piecemeal.

A PRIME INDICATION that some form of political mail surveillance was implemented during the Nixon years is the fact that J. Edgar Hoover, the late FBI director who objected to most of Huston's schemes, actually urged beefing up a program where names and addresses are taken from mail or targeted individuals and filed away.

Hoover, however, demanded that the operation be conducted under proper legal procedures thru the use of mail covers. The federal postal code allows bona fide law enforcement agencies, including CIA to order postal inspectors to record information from envelopes for them.

In a special June, 1970, report to the President signed by Hoover in behalf of a committee on interagency intelligence use of covert or illegal mail coverage is described as "extremely successful in producing hard-core and authentic intelligence which is not obtained from any other source."

THE REPORT ALSO states "high level postal authorities have, in the past, provided complete cooperation and have maintained full security of this [illegal] program."

When questioned about activities in both legal and illegal mail coverage operations, the postal service refused to respond until the current congressional probes into domestic spying are completed.

However, a former member of the postal service's intelligence gathering operation said that in some years there were as many as 700 legal mail covers operating. This, he explained, could involve thousands of persons because the targets are often political groups which receive lots of mail.

The Justice Department official who originally acknowledged he turned over the names of the 9,000 political dissidents to the CIA said some of those names came from files developed by mail covers.

JAMES DEVINE, one-time head of the interagency domestic intelligence unit, said, however, he doesn't know just how large a role they played.

There are several known cases where mail spying has been used to develop dossiers on potential radicals. The most famous is the case of Lori Paton, a 15-year-old Newark, N. J., girl.

As part of a social studies classroom project, she sent a request for information to the New York headquarters of the Socialist Party. Her letter was intercepted by an FBI mail cover and agents were dispatched to interview the girl's school principal and her father's employer.

As a result of a subsequent lawsuit filed by her parents — the American Civil Liberties Union represented her — the FBI admitted she had been targeted by a 120-day mail cover and that her file was placed under the agency's subversive heading.

OTHER WELL KNOWN mail screening cases have documented widespread use of the technique overseas by Army intelligence units inves-

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